

VFI: History - DeMotte, IN

# THE BIG FIRE

at DeMotte, Indiana



Wednesday, April 15, 1936

Price Twenty-five Cents

# DeMotte Before the Fire

scene of the DeMotte west side business block, before the fire, showing the new postoffice building and Otto DeYoung's two new buildings.



# A Short History of DeMotte, Indiana

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DeMotte is located in Jasper county, in northwestern Indiana about twenty miles north of Rensselaer (the county seat), and twenty miles south of Crown Point.

Situated right at the edge of what was once the grand marsh of the old Kankakee river, DeMotte is now the center of a thriving community. The town is not incorporated, but the state highway department lists the population at 750. Dairying, poultry raising, small vegetable and fruit farms, together with livestock and general farming is the source from which the people derive their living.

The citizens of this community are mostly of Holland descent. There are three Holland Reformed churches in the community, in addition to a Methodist Episcopal church.

There is a grade and high school building located at DeMotte. At the present time a new gymnasium and class rooms are being added. About 350 students are enrolled in the school.

The town boasts of a bank, two department stores, two hardware stores, a newspaper, several grocery stores, garages, feed mill, cheese plant, pickle factory, a large lumber yard, restaurants, a hotel, shoe shops, filling stations, post office, farm machinery dealers, barber shops, etc.

The first settlers came to this section some 100 years ago, but the town received its name about 60 years ago, it being named after Congressman DeMotte, whose home was at Valparaiso.

The first settlers in this section derived their living mainly, from trapping and hunting. Later, the dredge ditches opened up more and more ground to cultivation, and in 1917 the Kankakee river was straightened and dredged. This drained nearly all the old marsh land.

# DeMotte Has No Fire Protection

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The town of DeMotte, unincorporated, has been without any fire protection of any kind. No fire truck, no water system was available.

The profits from the sale of these booklets will go toward the purchase of fire equipment for the town. Your purchase of this booklet is appreciated.



## Side Walk To Be Lowered In Rebuilding

The sidewalks through the town of DeMotte's business district will be lowered to the proper level in rebuilding. When the state highway was built through town the road was dug down, leaving the stores perched up some three or four feet. This will be remedied in rebuilding.



Scene at height of fire, showing Crown Point fire truck playing water on DeYoung's building



# Four Fire Departments Respond To Call For Aid

The town of DeMotte, businessmen and citizens in general, owe a debt of gratitude to our neighboring towns who so quickly and generously responded to our call for help.

The Hebron fire department sent a truck with men.

The Crown Point fire department sent out a truck and men to operate it.

The Lowell fire department responded with a truck and men.

The Schneider fire department sent their truck and men.

Due to the lack of water, all the trucks were handicapped. But without their aid every business house in town on the south-end would have gone, and no one knows how many more residences.

Handicapped as they were by the high wind and lack of water, the four departments fought the flames foot by foot. Scorched faces, hands and loss of equipment attest to their fine efforts.

How the debt can be repaid is something we do not know. Words fail us! Thank God for neighbors such as these!

## CARD OF THANKS

Acting for the DeMotte Merchants' Association, we want to publicly express our heart-felt thanks for the splendid efforts of the Hebron fire department, the Crown Point fire department, the Lowell department and the Schneider department. To those hundreds of volunteers who helped in so many ways, we also owe a debt of gratitude.

DeMOTTE MERCHANTS' ASS'N.

J. B. Cox, President

H. C. Rathburn, Sec.



Looking south on west side of business section which bore brunt of fire that leveled nineteen business houses and two dwellings. Photographed by H. F. Parker, Rensselaer photographer, shortly after fire left \$200,000 ruins in its wake.



Smoldering ruins today, where yesterday stood small but flourishing DeMotte business establishments. The William Swartz Mercantile store stood on the corner in the foreground. Next in order

were Mary's restaurant, DeKeck and Sons' hardware and grocery store, a pool room, DeYoung's store and the new postoffice building. Total loss from the fire exceeded \$200,000.



**Rear view of Ruth's Restaurant and Bakery shop, above, shows just how completely that and adjoining DeMotte buildings were wiped out by yesterday's fire. Few of the stores had basements.**

**When the floor was burned from under the shop's cookstove and oven, they simply settled down to the ground. Several of the buildings burned were only recently completed and occupied.**



# \$150,000 Damage to 21 Buildings at DeMotte

## Lack of Fire Fighting Equipment Causes Big Loss

The most disastrous fire in the history of Jasper County struck DeMotte shortly before 3:00 p. m., Wednesday, April 15, 1936, and when the flames were finally halted after desperate efforts by the members of four different fire departments, fifteen business houses and two residences were leveled to the ground. Over half of the business section was wiped out. The origin of the fire is unknown. Flames were first discovered in the Al Konovsky storage house, three or four people discovering the blaze at once. Fanned by the high wind that prevailed at that time, the flames spread rapidly and building after building was added to the fiery cauldron that consumed everything before it. The list of those who suffered losses is as follows:

The Al Konovsky office building and storage house for high grade lumber. Two other buildings containing a power saw, planer, etc., were also destroyed. Estimated damages \$15,000. The large storage sheds and elevator were saved.

The William Swart grocery and hardware building. Entire stock lost. Damage to stock and building \$12,000.

The Arthur Lagaveen store of dry goods, shoes, etc. Stock partly saved. Damage may run to \$10,000. Building loss \$5,000.

Mary's Restaurant, stock completely destroyed. Damage to equipment and building \$6,000.

The Art Burk barber shop. Building and equipment all destroyed, estimated loss \$3,000.

The H. C. DeKock & Sons grocery. Building and entire stock destroyed. Estimated loss \$12,000.

The DeKock & Sons hardware store, very little stock saved. Estimated damage to stock and building, \$5,000.

The H. Osting shoe store, damage to stock and building estimated at \$10,000.

The Otto DeYoung & Sons hardware and implement store, erected only six months ago. Tractors and farm machinery saved. Loss of stock and building estimated at \$5,000.

The Otto DeYoung & Sons pool room. Loss estimated at \$4,000.

The new postoffice building. Loss of equipment and building estimated at \$9,000.

The True barber shop, loss of equipment \$1,500.

The Hart building, containing Ruth's restaurant and bakery. A complete loss, estimated at \$8,500.

The S. & J. Bonstra shop. Damage estimated at \$3,000.



The John Bunning real estate office. Insurance papers, receipts, etc., all destroyed. Value unknown. The building loss estimated at \$1,500. Mr. Bunning also owned the Swart and Lagaveen store buildings.

The John Bunning residence with most of the contents. Estimated damage \$4,000.

The Sam McGinnis home and barn. Complete loss, estimated at \$4,000.

The DeMotte Telephone company had a loss of several hundred dollars in telephones and equipment burned.

The total loss was in the neighborhood of \$150,000.

The fire was brought under control and stopped at the postoffice building about 4:30 p. m.

The John Terbong Coffee Shop, Curtin's Restaurant, Cheever's Garage, Buchanan's drug store, Ed DeBruin's grocery, the John Shuey cream station, the plant of the Kankakee Valley Post, the Neal Sekema garage, and the Standard Oil Station are the only business places on the south end of the block to escape the fire. The contents of these buildings were hastily moved to places of safety as the flames progressed and destruction seemed imminent. Each place suffered severe losses in the process of moving, and it was several days before they could resume normal business again.

Lack of fire fighting equipment gave the fire fiend full sway. Calls for help to neighboring towns were made and fire trucks from Hebron, Crown Point, Lowell, Schneider and Boone Township were soon on the scene and joined their forces in a valiant fight to stop the progress of the fire.

A high wind from the north-west drove the flames rapidly from building to building in spite of the combined efforts of the fire departments from four towns, which came to the aid of DeMotte.

The fire apparently broke out in the south-east corner of the Al Konovsky office building, a two-story frame building. The high wind drove it into the rear of the Swart, Lagaveen, DeKocks, Mary's Restaurant, and then it spread south. The cause of the start of the fire is unknown.

The Bank of DeMotte building directly across from Mary's Restaurant, withstood the fire. The plate glass windows were broken, but little damage was done to the interior. The Al Konovsky home and the Hotel were just enough out of the line of the wind to escape.

The fire was so hot between the main street buildings that the pavement was broken in numerous places.

The Northern Indiana Public Service company had a large force of men quickly on the grounds and by 9 p. m. light service had been restored.

Through the request of J. B. Cox, as president of the DeMotte Merchants' Association, and Joe Lump, state fire marshal, the Gary Electric Light company sent a large portable electric light plant on a truck here for duty all night with flood lights.

Simon Groet, township trustee, employed six watchman for all night duty Wednesday night. The Indiana State Police sent special officers here to direct traffic. The fire truck, recently purchased by the DeMotte merchants, stood uptown all night, ready for duty.

# DeMotte Is Replacing All Buildings Burned In Big Fire

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Strange as it may seem, DeMotte is not to go the way of most small towns when a catastrophe such as this strikes. Within one week after the fire, plans were completed for the erection of every building lost.

The postoffice building, owned by Al Konovsky, is to be rebuilt on the old foundation. This building had been finished only six months before, and besides the postoffice it housed a barber shop.

Otto DeYoung's two store rooms, finished only last fall, are to be rebuilt on the same location.

Herman Osting is rebuilding his store room. This building was only a few years old, of brick and concrete construction.

H. C. DeKock started clearing away the debris two days after the fire and his two-room store building is being rushed to completion.

Mary's Restaurant, known over all northern Indiana, will be rebuilt at the same location.

Al Konovsky purchased two lots at the north end of the block on the west side of the street from John Bunning and is erecting two large store rooms. Mr. Konovsky is also erecting a new office building for his lumber business.

H. C. DeKock purchased from Frank Hart the property where Ruth's Bakery was housed, and is erecting a new building there.

# Insurance Will Repay About One Half of Loss

The payment of insurance to DeMotte merchants for losses sustained in the big fire of Wednesday, April 15, 1936, will cover only approximately one-half of the actual damage. The lack of any fire-fighting equipment and the type of frame buildings which housed some of the businesses caused a high rate to be fixed. Naturally, many of the business houses were under insured.

All insurance companies had men on the grounds quickly and all merchants report agreeable adjustments.



## Police and Fire Marshal Give Aid

State Policemen Gettinger and Wells were stationed here during the fire and for several days following the fire handled an enormous amount of traffic.

Joe Lump, state fire marshal, was here early Wednesday evening and took charge during the night and the hectic days that followed.



View of east side of business section which suffered extensive damage after wind spewed embers from blaze on opposite side of street. Eyewitnesses stated a sheet of flame appeared to leap across the 60-foot highway. Occupants of those buildings had not removed any of their stock or furnishing in the belief they were beyond the reach of the flames. Shows site of John Bunning residence and office



## Ruins of Bakery

A teacup and a spoon—small beginnings indeed upon which to rebuild a restaurant and bakery. Yet upon these beginnings, all that remained of their business when it was wiped out by fire, Mr. and Mrs. Orval P. Rowen, shown here, plan to rebuild a new “Ruth’s Restaurant and Bakery Shop” in DeMotte. They had opened their shop for business only recently and had not put through an insurance application.



# DeMotte "Makes the Headlines" in a Big Way

Attention of the whole middle-west was brought on DeMotte for several days following the fire of April 15th. The Chicago, South Bend, Gary and all Calumet Cities, Indianapolis and hundreds of other daily and weekly newspapers featured the fire in big headlines. Radio stations WIND, of Gary, and WLS and WGN of Chicago, broke into their regular programs on several occasions Wednesday night and Thursday to give reports.

On Sunday, following the fire, some 25,000 people visited the town.



Volunteer fire fighters carrying water to the fire trucks parked in the center of the street. The fire destroyed buildings down to and including the white front building shown (postoffice).

Scene at DeMotte showing part of the huge crowd. By actual count some 6,000 automobiles, carrying 25,000 people, drove to the scene of the disaster.





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